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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to compare the effects of overall, selective, and no error correction on the quality and quantity of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' writing. A total of 107 secondary school students in 3 classes participated in this study. These classes were randomly assigned to the three treatment conditions: overall error correction, where the teacher corrected all grammatical, mechanical, and organizational errors on each composition; selective error correction where the teacher corrected only two types of errors on the composition; and the no error correction where the students received no error correction at all. The study lasted for 22 weeks with one 2 week interruption for a winter vacation. There were pre- and posttests of composition writing. The data were analyzed using the one-way analysis of variance and the t-test. The pretest results showed no significant differences in the mean scores among the three groups. The posttest results revealed significant differences among the three groups, favoring the selective error correction group. Selective error correction improves not only the quality and quantity of EFL students' writing, but supports the contention that errors should not be left uncorrected in the hope that they will correct themselves naturally but not so much that they demoralize the learners and put them on the defensive. (KFT)

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Effects of Overall, Selective, and No Error Correction on the Quality and Quantity of EFL Students' Writing

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare the effects of overall, selective, and no error correction on the quality and quantity of EFL students' writing. A total of 107 secondary school students in three intact classes participated in the study. These classes were randomly assigned to the three treatment conditions: (1) overall error correction, (2) selective error correction, and (3) no error correction. In the overall error correction condition, the teacher corrected all grammatical, mechanical, and organizational errors on each composition. In the selective error correction condition, the teacher corrected only two types of errors on each composition. In the no error correction condition, students received no corrections at all. The study lasted for twenty-two weeks interrupted by a two-week winter vacation. Prior to, and at the end of the treatments, all subjects were tested on composition writing. The obtained data were analyzed using the one-way analysis of variance and the t-test. The results showed no significant differences in the mean scores among the three groups of the study on the pretest. The posttest results revealed significant differences among the three groups of the study, favoring the selective error correction treatment condition. These results were discussed and recommendations for future research were suggested.

Theoretical background to the study

The treatment of either all, some, or no errors in the writing of ESL/EFL students has been a crucial subject of debate among language teaching theoreticians. Drawing on the behaviorist view of learning, advocates of the audiolingual approach as well as a number of language teaching theoreticians (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Rivers, 1986) view errors as sins which should be avoided and eliminated at all cost. They further believe that all errors should be saliently and immediately corrected for fear that learners may become habituated to their own errors. As Larsen-Freeman (1986) states, "It is important to prevent learners from making errors. Errors lead to the formation of bad habits. When errors do occur, they should be immediately corrected by the teacher" (p. 40).

In the literature, the disadvantages of using the overall correction technique for responding to student writing are many. One of these disadvantages is that overall correction can do serious harm to the relationship between student and teacher. As Pehrsson and Robinson (1985) point out, "Overcorrection can destroy a student-teacher relationship and result in children's [and anyone else's] developing a dislike for reading and/or writing" (p. 137). Another disadvantage is that overall correction can negatively affect students' self-confidence (Barnett, 1989; Raimes, 1983; Woods, 1989). Still another disadvantage is that overall correction may hinder the learning of writing partly because it encourages students to avoid mistakes by writing less and partly because students cannot learn everything at once. As Pehrsson and Denner (1989) put it:

> **By overcorrecting, teachers demonstrate no emphasis on any particular objective, leaving students confused as to what is important. If everything is important nothing stands out as important. Students cannot be expected to**

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> fix everything at once, yet adults expect perfection. . . . Perfection and creative learning do not live in the same home; in fact, they are enemies. (p. 64)

They (Pehrsson and Denner) maintain:

> To learn to write, students need to write; the less they write, the less they will learn about writing. If teachers emphasize detailed correction before quantity, they almost certainly will kill quantity. . . . Students who write in quantity and are overcorrected on a paper are likely to play it safer the next time. Playing it safer means making fewer mistakes by writing less. (p. 66)

A final disadvantage is that overall correction makes considerable demands upon teachers by requiring them to stay for countless hours correcting their students' compositions (Cohen, 1987; Hendrickson, 1980; Mahili, 1994; Robb, Ross, and Shortreed, 1986; Sommers, 1984).

Despite the previously-mentioned disadvantages of the overall correction technique, the fact remains that EFL teachers continue to use it. Furthermore, some studies revealed that ESL and EFL students want their teachers to correct all errors in their written work (e.g., Leki, 1991; Aboul-Fetouh, 1994).

Drawing on the cognitivist view of learning, some language teaching approaches, including among others the whole-language approach and the comprehension approach, propose no correction at all. Such approaches claim that students' errors are natural and are supposed to disappear gradually through communication. The most obvious advantage of this technique, as its advocates claim, is that it does not intimidate language learners (Truscott, 1996). However, the opponents of this technique claim that it sacrifices quality for the sake of quantity. As Hammerly (1991) puts it:

> The opinion that no error needs to be corrected in the SL classroom is preposterous, and the end result of that practice is sadly obvious. Up to a point there is general improvement with little or no correction. But in the classroom, that point represents minimal (i.e. survival) SL competence. (p. 91)

In parallel to the aforementioned opposing views, a number of language teaching theoreticians (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 1985; Cohen, 1975; Doff, 1996; Field, 1999; Hantrais, 1989; Hendrickson, 1987; Michaelides, 1990; Omaggio, 1986; Pehrsson and Denner, 1987; Pehrsson and Robinson, 1985; Ur, 1996) advocate the use of a selective error correction technique for responding to student writing. Such theoreticians hold that teachers should correct only the errors that seem most important or only errors of a certain type (e.g., items that were taught recently). Hendrickson (1987), for example, stresses the importance of this technique for responding to FL students' writing this way:

> There appears to be affective as well as cognitive justification for tolerating some errors produced by language learners. Foreign language educators generally agree that tolerating some oral and written errors helps learners communicate more confidently in a foreign language. (p. 358)

On the previously-mentioned theoretical grounds, it seems likely that the selective error correction technique capitalizes on the strengths of both the overall and no error correction techniques and thereby shares the weaknesses of neither.

Research hypotheses

The hypotheses derived from the discussion above were: (1) There would be no significant differences in the pretest mean scores among the three groups of the study on the quality and quantity of writing. (2) The overall correction group would score significantly higher than the no error correction group on the quality of writing on the posttest. (3) The no error correction group would score significantly higher than the overall correction group on the quantity of writing on the posttest. (4) The selective error correction group would score significantly higher than the other two groups on both the quality and quantity of writing on the posttest.

Review of related research

In reviewing the research literature related to the problem under investigation, the researcher found only two studies that compared the effects of overall versus selective error correction on ESL students' writing. In his Ph.D. dissertation, Hendrickson (1976) compared the effects of correcting all errors to correcting global errors alone on ESL students' written composition. The sample for the study consisted of 24 foreign-born adults who voluntarily enrolled in an intermediate English language course. The study was conducted during an eight-week period. The results revealed no differences attributable to the two error correction treatments at the .05 level. In an MA thesis, Whitus (1990) compared the effects of selective versus wholesale error correction on ESL students' writing. Over 13-weeks a control group (n = 7) had all grammatical errors corrected, while an experimental group (n = 9) had only article and sentence construction (run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and comma splices) errors corrected. The results of the study showed that

> In case of grammatical errors (represented by articles), there was no significant difference in the performance of subjects treated with selective correction (experimental group) and those treated with wholesale correction (control group). There was, however, a significant difference between the two groups performance in reducing sentence construction errors. The selective error correction technique proved to be much more effective than wholesale correction (p = .002). (p. 90)

The research literature reviewed above reveals that there is no research evidence regarding the comparative effects of overall, selective, and no error correction on ESL/EFL students' writing. It appears, therefore, that there is a need for research in this area. In response to this need, the present study compares the effects of these three techniques on both the quality and quantity of EFL students' writing.

Method

Subjects

The subjects for the study consisted of three intact classes totaling 107 students. These classes were randomly selected from a total of sixty first-year classes enrolled in public secondary schools in Suez School District, Egypt. All subjects spent 5 years learning English as a foreign language. The class size ranged from 35 to 37 students. The subjects

also included the three English language teachers of the classes participating in the study. Each teacher had more than ten years of teaching experience. All were males, ranging in age from 35 to 40. And all were judged by their principals and supervisors as highly qualified teachers.

Teaching materials

The instructional materials consisted of twenty composition topics (see Appendix). These topics were selected in accordance with the following criteria: (1) eliciting various types of writing, (2) eliciting the errors Arab learners usually make in writing English as a foreign language, (3) dealing with contemporary issues, and (4) moving from easy to difficult grammatical structures.

Description of variables

The independent variables for the study consisted of three experimental conditions: (1) overall error correction, (2) selective error correction, and (3) no error correction. In the overall error correction condition, the teacher corrected all grammatical, mechanical, and organizational errors on each composition. In the selective error correction condition, the teacher selected two points on each composition and corrected only the errors that relate to these points (see Appendix). In choosing the errors to be corrected in this condition, the researcher was guided by the findings of a number of error analysis studies of the common writing errors made by Arabic-speaking EFL learners (e.g., Kharma, 1986, 1987; Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989; Mattar, 1989; Meziani, 1984; Mohasseb, 1992; Selim, 1980). Furthermore, as Pehrsson and Denner (1989: 65) suggested, students in this condition were informed about the types of errors corrected on each composition by filling the following stamp at the top of each composition:

The following types of errors were corrected on this composition
(1)----------
(2)----------

In the no error correction condition, students received no corrections at all. The dependent variables for the study were the quality and quantity of EFL students' writing as measured by the pre- and posttests.

To neutralize extraneous variables, all students were not informed of their participation in an experiment. The researcher also visited each of the three classes five times to ensure that all instructors were dealing with the same composition topics in the same manner. Furthermore, the training time for each of the three groups was identical, each training session lasted 50 minutes.

Procedure

Prior to the commencement of the study, the three classes were randomly assigned to the three treatment conditions. Each teacher was also provided with instructions for implementing the technique assigned to him. At the beginning of the experiment, the three groups were given a free-writing task as a pretest. Each student was asked to write

a composition about how he/she spent the last summer holiday. The directions for this task read as follows:

> You will have fifty minutes to write as much as you can about the assigned topic. Also, write as accurately as possible. You must stop writing at the end of fifty minutes.

Following pretesting, each group received 20 training sessions in free writing, at the rate of one per week during the 1999/2000 school year, running from the beginning of October to the mid of March and interrupted by a two-week winter vacation. After the treatment period was over, a free-writing task was administered to all groups as a posttest. This task called for each student to write a composition about his/her hometown. The directions for this task were the same as those of the pretest task. After that, the pre- and posttest compositions were scored by two independent raters.

Scoring

The quality and quantity of each composition were scored independently from each other. Quality was measured by counting the total number of words in error-free T-units (Robb, Ross, and Shortreed, 1986), and quantity was measured, as Myers (1985: 75) suggested, by "a simple count of total words" in each composition. Prior to scoring sessions, the two raters were instructed in the use of the scoring schemes. Interrater reliability was also established for both dependent variables. It was found to be 0.87 for quality and 0.98 for quantity. To avoid scoring bias, the raters knew nothing about the nature of the study, and the subjects used identification numbers on the pre- and post-test compositions. Furthermore, the raters made no marks on students' compositions and recorded their scores on separate sheets.

Results and discussion

All the data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Norušis, 1993).

Pretest results

Table 1
Results of the One-Way ANOVA for Pretest Scores

Sources of Variance	DF	Dependent Variables					
		Quality			Quantity		
		SS	MS	F-ratio	SS	MS	F-ratio
Between Groups	2	14.569	7.285	0.30	6.79	3.39	0.03
Within Groups	104	2530.982	24.336		10334.73	99.37	
Total	106	2545.551			10341.51		

As shown in Table 1, the one-way ANOVA results indicated that the three groups of the study did not differ significantly in the quality or the quantity of writing prior to the commencement of the study ($f = 0.30$, $p > 0.05$; $f = 0.03$, $p > 0.05$, respectively). Therefore, the first hypothesis was accepted. This finding may be due to the fact that Egyptian EFL teachers, at both the primary and preparatory school levels, use the same

workbooks for teaching writing and the overall correction technique for correcting their students' errors.

Posttest results

Table 2
Results of the One-Way ANOVA for Posttest Scores

Sources of Variance	DF	Dependent Variables					
		Quality			Quantity		
		SS	MS	F-ratio	SS	MS	F-ratio
Between Groups	2	2153.97	1076.98	18.94	9950.42	4975.21	62.15
Within Groups	104	5912.39	56.85		8325.26	80.05	
Total	106	8066.35			18275.68		

As shown in Table 2, the one-way ANOVA results indicated that there were significant differences in the posttest mean scores among the three treatment groups on both the quality and quantity of writing ($f = 18.94, p < 0.01$; $f = 62.15, p < 0.01$, respectively). Therefore, the t-test was used to determine the significance of the difference in the mean scores between each two groups.

Table 3
The T-Value of the Difference in the Mean Scores Between Each Two Treatment Groups

Group	N	Dependent Variables					
		Quality			Quantity		
		M	SD	T-value	M	SD	T-value
Overall	35	31.20	5.25	1.11	55.89	8.35	5.05*
No	37	29.54	7.23		64.97	6.89	
Selective	35	39.80	9.54	4.67*	79.51	11.17	10.02*
Overall	35	31.20	5.25		55.89	8.35	
Selective	35	39.80	9.54	5.16*	79.51	11.17	6.05*
NO	37	29.54	7.23		64.97	6.89	

* = $p < 0.001$

As shown in Table 3, results from the t-tests indicated that, contrary to what the researcher hypothesized, there was no significant difference in the quality of writing between the overall correction group and the no correction group ($t = 1.11, p > 0.05$). Therefore, the second hypothesis was rejected. This result is consistent with that of Semke (1984) which showed that overall correction did not increase the accuracy of EFL students' writing. A possible explanation of this finding is that overall correction might cause students' motivation to plummet and their attitudes to drift toward the negative, which could, in turn, act as blocks to the improvement of accuracy. This interpretation was confirmed by a study conducted by Major (1988) which showed that overall

correction developed negative attitudes towards writing and increased student writing anxiety. Another possible explanation of this finding is that overall correction might be confusing and misleading to students (Chaudron, 1988). A final explanation of this finding is that overall correction might mismatch the subjects' preferences for feedback on writing.

Results from the t-tests also indicated that the no correction group scored significantly higher than the overall correction group on the quantity of writing ($t = 5.05$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the third hypothesis was accepted. This finding might be due to the built-in fear and avoidance of writing caused by excessive correction. The overall correction technique might also lead students to believe that they have nothing acceptable to communicate. Conversely, the no correction technique might create a non-threatening atmosphere which encouraged students to write in quantity.

The results of the t-tests further showed that students in the selective error correction group scored significantly than those in the overall and no correction groups on both the quality and quantity of writing. Therefore, the last hypothesis was accepted, confirming the effectiveness of the selective error correction technique for improving the quality and quantity of EFL students writing. There are three possible reasons for the beneficial effects of the selective error correction technique in this study. One reason is that students in the selective error correction group might feel more confident about composing in the foreign language than students in the other two groups. A second reason is that the correction of only two types of errors at a time might fix corrections in the students' long-term memory. A third reason is that the selective error correction technique might respond to the subjects' preference to be corrected in a non-threatening way. A final reason is that the selective error correction technique might improve students' attitudes towards writing and reduce student writing anxiety more than the other two techniques.

Limitations and conclusions

The results of this study are limited by the definition of the selective error correction technique, the sample size, the characteristics of the subjects, the length of the study, and the composition topics used in training sessions. Within these limitations, it can be concluded that the selective error correction technique not only improves the quality of EFL students' writing but also improves its quantity. This conclusion supports Omaggio's contention that "Errors should not be left uncorrected on the assumption that in time they will self correct 'naturally'. Neither should they be corrected in ways that put the learner on the defensive" (1986, p. 282). It also supports Ur's contention that "The correcting of mistakes is part of the language instruction, but too much of it can be discouraging and demoralizing" (1996, p. 171). To sum up, the results of this study emphasize the importance of both the affective and cognitive factors for improving the quality and quantity of EFL students' writing.

Recommendations for future research

This study suggests the need for investigating the effects of a selective error correction technique that focuses on a global-to-local hierarchy of errors versus a selective error correction technique that focuses on a local-to-global hierarchy of errors on students' writing. Future research is also needed to determine the effects of overt versus covert

correction of selective errors on students' writing. Finally, it is recommended that the present study should be replicated with students at different grade levels.

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Appendix

Composition topics and types of errors corrected on each composition under the selective error correction treatment condition

No.	Composition topics	Types of errors
1	Your hobby	(1) Wrong use of the present simple tense (2) Dropping the /s/ from the third person present singular verb
2	Your favorite job	(1) Omission of be and have (2) Missing or misplaced periods
3	A frightening experience	(1) Wrong use of the past simple tense (2) Wrong spelling of the past tense verb
4	Life in the future	(1) Incorrect use of the future simple tense (2) Missing or misplaced commas
5	Traffic problems	(1) Wrong use of pronouns (2) Missing or misplaced capitals
6	City life	(1) Misuse of adjectives (2) Malformation of adjectives
7	Leisure time	(1) Misplaced adverbs (2) Malformation of adverbs
8	Robots in the workplace are a help/hindrance to the welfare of workers	(1) Missing or misplaced prepositions (2) Malformation of the noun plural
9	How our villages can be improved	(1) Incorrect use of passive (2) Wrong spelling of the past participle
10	A conversation you overheard	(1)Incorrect use of direct and indirect speech (2) Missing or misplaced inverted commas
11	Should married women work outside the home?	(1) Wrong use of modal verbs (2) Misuse of apostrophes
12	Tourism in Egypt	(1) Incorrect shift in person or number (2) Lack of topic sentence
13	Birth control	(1) Lack of subject-verb agreement (2) Lack of anaphoric reference
14	Uses of Computers in everyday life	(1) Missing or misplaced modifiers (2) Missing or misplaced colons
15	Pollution	(1) Wrong word order (2) Lack of cataphoric reference
16	Space exploration	(1) Incorrect shift in tense (2) Lack of supporting details
17	An accident you once saw on the road	(1) Wrong use of adverbial clauses and phrases of time (2) Disorganized paragraphs
18	Overpopulation: Causes and effects	(1) Wrong use of adverbial clauses and phrases of cause (2) Lack of conclusion
19	If you were a millionaire	(1) Wrong use of conditional clauses and phrases (third type) (2) Lack of cohesive devices
20	Life today and a hundred years ago	(1) Wrong use of adverbial clauses and phrases of comparison (2) Malformation of the comparative form of adjectives